

# The Level of Public Knowledge on the Law of Handshaking between Family Members of Different Genders from the Islamic Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Handshaking is one of the etiquettes that holds high moral value and is even encouraged in Islam. In the context of Malay culture, handshaking is a sign of affection that helps foster harmony within the family. The practice of handshaking among family members is highly emphasized by the Malay community, which is known for valuing etiquette and good manners in family life. However, some members of society view this etiquette purely from a moral perspective, without considering the issue of compliance with Islamic law when shaking hands, especially when it involves family members of different genders. As a religion that governs human relationships, Islam sets boundaries regarding the permissibility of handshaking when it involves two different genders. Therefore, this article aims to examine the public's knowledge of the law regarding handshaking between family members of different genders from the Islamic perspective. This quantitative study involves 364 participants from the Malay Muslim community across Malaysia. Data were collected through questionnaires distributed via Google Forms and analyzed descriptively using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The study found that the respondents' knowledge regarding handshaking between family members of different genders is still at a moderate level. There are still a number of respondents who are not well-informed about the actual Islamic rulings regarding the practice of handshaking among family members. This study suggests that more efforts should be made to raise awareness of the Islamic rulings on handshaking between family members, so that the Malay community does not only engage in this activity based on etiquette and good manners but also respects the laws set by Islamic teachings.

**Keywords:** Handshaking, handshaking among family members, boundaries of handshaking, *mahram* & *ajnabi*.

## INTRODUCTION

Handshaking is a social practice that symbolizes respect and appreciation between individuals. In Malay society, this practice is considered part of the etiquette and noble values that have been passed down through generations and is an important element of Malay culture (Nor Arseha et al., 2022; Ahmad Zamil et al., 2021). Handshaking not only occurs in the general social context but also plays a significant role in family relationships. While handshaking is often seen as a way to maintain decorum and politeness in Malay culture, it is also closely related to the values of Islam. Islam places great emphasis on ethics and etiquette in social interactions, particularly in family relationships.

According to al-Husaini (1441H), one of the etiquettes encouraged in Islam when meeting relatives is handshaking, especially when conveying good news or offering congratulations (Zaidan, 2000). The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also said about the virtues of handshaking in a hadith that means: "You should shake hands, for it will remove feelings of enmity, and you should give gifts to one another, for it will create love and remove hostility" (Malik, 2021). This hadith indicates that handshaking is not just a cultural practice, but also a Sunnah that strengthens relationships and eliminates grudges. However, this practice has

certain limitations in Islam, especially when it involves gender differences. Handshaking between individuals of the same gender is recommended (al-Khatib al-Shirbini, 1994), but when it involves individuals of different genders, Islamic law permits it only between those who are permanent *mahrms*. For those who are not *mahrms*, such as non-related individuals (*ajnnabi*), handshaking is prohibited (Wazarat al-Awqaf, 1983). This has been a central topic of discussion among scholars who have debated the boundaries of interaction and the prohibition of *ikhtilat* (mingling) between non-mahram men and women (Zaidan, 2000; Wazarat al-Awqaf, 1983).

Although the rulings on handshaking between Muslims are clear, there is still confusion among the Malay community, particularly in understanding the boundaries of this law. The strong familial closeness within the Malay community often leads them to regard relationships with cousins or close relatives as being similar to sibling relationships (Nor Adilah et al., 2019), which sometimes transcends the Islamic legal boundaries concerning interactions between *mahrms* and non-*mahrms*. This situation raises questions about the level of public knowledge regarding the law of handshaking among family members from the Islamic perspective.

Therefore, this study aims to assess the level of knowledge among the Malay community regarding the law of handshaking between family members from an Islamic perspective. This study will focus on how the community understands and practices the law of handshaking in the context of family relationships, as well as to what extent they adhere to the boundaries set by religion.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The practice of shaking hands in Malay society is not just a form of greeting; it has become a social etiquette and a noble value in Malay culture. This tradition is practiced in various situations, whether in daily life, wedding ceremonies, family gatherings, or official events. In the context of family gatherings, it is emphasized and given great importance to be practiced among family members. According to Nordin (1999), shaking hands is a primary custom for the Malay community when engaging in visits, whether with family members, neighbors, or friends. This practice is instilled from a young age. This can be seen in the study by Noor Aida and Nasihah (2005) regarding the portrayal of Malay women in the children's animation series *Upin & Ipin*. Their study concludes that the portrayal of women in the series plays a significant role as educators for young children in family life, including encouraging handshaking among family members. The findings indicate that the practice of shaking hands has become deeply ingrained in Malay society, especially within family life. A study conducted by Noor Aina (2011) on a book about Malay culture titled *Malay Courtesy* found that the practice of shaking hands is a noble tradition that has long been practiced by the Malay community and is highly emphasized by the older generations.

Empirical studies on handshaking are partly focused on the etiquette and cultural practices associated with it. A study by Jamilah and Nur Nasliza (2016) on the practice of "budi bahasa budaya kita" found that one of the well-known practices, especially in terms of its importance, is shaking hands with elders. One of the factors contributing to the high level of awareness regarding handshaking is the parental guidance on this etiquette. Respondents mentioned that their parents would always extend their hands for a handshake, which, in turn, influenced the children to appreciate this noble practice. In another study by Norhisham (2018) on the influence of school activities on students' moral development, it was found that shaking hands when meeting someone was among the components of moral appreciation, with a moderate-high level, recording a mean score of 3.72. These findings clearly show that the practice of shaking hands remains relevant among school students.

Previous studies have largely focused on the culture of handshaking within the Malay community without addressing the legal position of handshaking from an Islamic perspective. Empirical studies, on the other hand, have mainly concentrated on the knowledge and practice of handshaking within a broader context, not specifically within the family setting. Therefore, this study is conducted to analyze the community's knowledge of the legal rulings regarding handshaking among family members from an Islamic perspective. This is a relevant study because Islam establishes specific boundaries regarding handshaking between individuals of different genders, even among family members.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is a quantitative research. Below is a detailed explanation of the methodology for this study:

**Population and Sample of the Study:** The population of this study consists of all Muslims in Malaysia, including those from Sabah and Sarawak, aged 15 and above. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the Malay population in Malaysia at the end of 2023 was 17,614,900 (Population Table: Malaysia, OpenDOSM Website, 2024). However, the actual population is expected to be slightly lower than this figure, as the data provided by the Department of Statistics Malaysia includes people of all age groups, and not all Malays are Muslim. Nonetheless, according to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), for a population exceeding 100,000, the largest population sample size is 384 people. Therefore, through simple random sampling, a total of 384 participants, both male and female Muslims from all states in Malaysia, were involved in this study.

**Data Collection Method:** Data was collected through the distribution of questionnaires. A total of 384 sets of questionnaires were distributed to respondents, all of which were completed accurately. The selection of questionnaires as the data collection method was intended to assess the respondents' level of knowledge regarding the legal rulings of handshaking among family members of different genders. This method is highly relevant because, according to Jackson (2015), questionnaires can measure how an individual acts, thinks, and feels about something. A person's knowledge refers to how they think about a particular issue.

The questionnaire is divided into two sections. In the first section, six criteria are identified to form the respondent's profile. In the second section, seven items regarding the boundaries of handshaking among family members are presented. Of these seven items, four use positive statements and three use negative statements. Respondents are required to respond to each item by selecting an answer on a Likert scale, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

The questionnaire that was developed was distributed using the Google Forms application. This method of distribution was chosen because it is highly convenient and helps save time, costs, and the researcher's effort. According to Siti Nurakmal, Siti Huzaima, and Norzaliza (2023), Google Forms is a web-based application that allows targeted users or respondents to provide quick responses simply through their smartphones or computers. The survey link hosted on Google Forms was then distributed using various social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, and Instagram. The distribution of the link took place from May 21st to June 6th, 2024.

**Data Analysis Method:** The quantitative data collected was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28. The analysis focused primarily on descriptive analysis, with emphasis on mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage. In the second section of the questionnaire, the data and scores for items that used negative statements were converted into positive statements to facilitate the presentation and analysis of the data.

To interpret the level of knowledge regarding the legal rulings on handshaking among family members of different genders, the mean scores were divided into three levels: low, moderate, and high. The division of these levels is based on the mean score interpretation scale by Pallant (2007) as shown in the table below:

Table 1: Mean Score Interpretation Scale

Number	Mean Score Range	Interpretation
1	1.00-2.33	Rendah
2	2.34-3.66	Sederhana
3	3.67-5.00	Tinggi

Source: Pallant (2007)

## FINDINGS

**Respondent Profile:** Based on Table 2, two-thirds of the respondents were female (71.1%), and the largest age group of respondents was within the 35-44 years age range (24.7%). A total of 5 respondents from the senior citizen group also participated in this study. Terengganu recorded the highest number of respondents, with 97 participants (25.3%), compared to other states such as Johor (12.0%), Negeri Sembilan (7.3%), and Sarawak (2.9%). The state with the lowest number of respondents was Perlis (0.8%). This low percentage may be related to the size and population of the state.

Table 2: Respondent Profile

Criteria	Frequency & Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	111 (28.9 %)
Female	273 (71.1 %)
<b>Age</b>	
15-24 years	86 (22.4 %)
25-34 years	84 (21.9 %)
35-44 years	95 (24.7 %)
45-54 years	81 (21.1 %)
55-64 years	33 (8.6 %)
65 years and above	5 (1.3 %)
<b>State</b>	
Johor	46 (12.0 %)
Melaka	11 (2.9 %)
Negeri Sembilan	28 (7.3 %)
Wilayah Persekutuan	11 (2.9 %)
Selangor	41 (10.7 %)
Perak	18 (4.7 %)
Pahang	34 (8.9 %)
Kedah	21 (5.5 %)
Kelantan	44 (11.5 %)
Terengganu	97 (25.3 %)
Pulau Pinang	11 (2.9 %)
Perlis	3 (.8 %)
Sabah	8 (2.1 %)

Sarawak	11 (2.9 %)
<b>Highest Educational Level</b>	
UPSR	3 (.8 %)
SRP/PMR/PT3	7 (1.8 %)
SPM	50 (13.0 %)
STPM/STAM/Foundation	53 (13.8 %)
Diploma	39 (10.2 %)
Bachelor's Degree:	176 (45.8 %)
Master's Degree	49 (12.8 %)
Doctorate (PhD)	7 (1.8 %)
<b>Highest Religious Education Level:</b>	
UPSR	7 (1.8 %)
SRP/PMR/PT3	14 (3.6 %)
SPM	163 (42.4 %)
STPM/STAM/Foundation	64 (16.7 %)
Bachelor's Degree	113 (29.4 %)
Master's Degree	18 (4.7 %)
Doctorate (PhD)	5 (1.3 %)
<b>Career Status</b>	
Student	84 (21.9 %)
Unemployed	45 (11.7 %)
Self-employed	41 (10.7 %)
Government Employee	125 (32.6 %)
Private Sector Employee	64 (16.7 %)
Retired	25 (6.5 %)

Source: Questionnaire form of the study via Google Forms (2024)

From the perspective of educational background, the majority of respondents (45.8%) are graduates with a Bachelor's degree, and 12.8% hold a Master's degree, while 1.8% have a Doctorate. This data indicates that most respondents are highly educated. However, not many of them have academic qualifications in religious studies. This is evident as 42.4% of the respondents received their highest formal religious education at the secondary school level (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia). Table 2 also shows that most of the respondents are in the working age group, with 60% still actively working, either in the government sector (32.6%), private sector (16.7%), or self-employed (10.7%). The remaining respondents are made up of non-workers (11.7%), students (21.9%), and retirees (6.5%).

The overall profile analysis indicates that the majority of respondents are from Terengganu and are in the 35-44 years age group. Most of them are employed in the government sector. Although most respondents are university graduates, the majority of them have only received formal religious education at the secondary school level.

**Level of Knowledge on Handshaking Among Family Members:** To assess respondents' knowledge regarding the rulings on handshaking among family members of different genders, seven items were presented regarding the permissibility of handshaking within the family with different gender relationships. Of the seven items, the first two items were related to handshaking among blood relatives, the next four items related to in-laws, and the last item concerned handshaking between relatives through breastfeeding. Below are the mean scores for each item to illustrate the respondents' level of knowledge.

Table 3: Respondents' Knowledge Level on Handshaking Laws

Item	Min	Standard Deviation	Level of Understanding
Handshaking is allowed with siblings of the same mother but different gender	3.99	1.262	High
Handshaking is forbidden for a woman with her uncle (husband of her mother)	4.18	1.173	High
Handshaking is allowed for a man with his stepmother (before they have consummated their marriage)	2.10	1.206	Low
Handshaking is forbidden for a woman with her stepfather (before they have consummated their marriage)	3.76	1.329	High
Handshaking is forbidden for a man with his biological mother-in-law	2.69	1.285	Moderate
Handshaking is forbidden for a woman with her father-in-law (father of her stepmother)	3.49	1.280	Moderate
Handshaking is allowed for a woman with her milk father-in-law	3.17	1.347	Moderate
<b>Average Mean Value</b>	3.34	0.483	Moderate

Source: Questionnaire form of the study via Google Forms (2024)

Referring to Table 2, the descriptive findings for the overall level of knowledge are found to be at a moderate level with a mean value of 3.34 and a standard deviation of 0.483. This indicates that the respondents' knowledge about the rules of handshaking among family members of different genders is still unsatisfactory. When looking at each item tested, out of seven items, only three items were well understood by the respondents, indicating a high level of knowledge. The highest mean recorded for these three items was 4.18, while the other two items recorded means of 3.76 and 3.99. The remaining three items were in the moderate knowledge level category, and one item fell under the low knowledge level category, with a mean score of 2.10 and a standard deviation of 1.206.

The lowest mean item is related to the obligation of shaking hands between a man and his stepmother before sexual intercourse between the father and the stepmother takes place. This finding illustrates that most respondents have incorrect knowledge, as many of them understand that a man is only allowed to shake hands with his stepmother (the father's new wife) after they have had sexual intercourse. The lowest mean item for



the moderate knowledge level is 2.69, which concerns the prohibition of shaking hands between a man and the biological mother of his stepmother. The mean reading indicates that respondents' knowledge about shaking hands with the biological mother of the father's wife, often referred to in Malay society as the step-grandmother, is at a moderate level. This also indicates that there is still confusion among the respondents regarding this ruling.

## DISCUSSION

The respondents' knowledge regarding the ruling on shaking hands among family members with a blood relation is seen to be quite good. This can be observed from the findings for items one and two, where both have high mean values and are categorized as high knowledge levels. Item one, which describes the permissibility of shaking hands among siblings from the same mother, was well understood by the respondents. This understanding aligns with Islamic law, which permits the practice of shaking hands among family members who are mahram muabbad (permanently unmarriageable due to blood relations) (Wazarat al-Awqaf, 1983). Furthermore, according to Zaidan (2000), this practice is recommended, as stated in the previous hadith. The siblings mentioned in item one are considered to be among the mahram muabbad group due to their blood relation (al-Nawawi, n.d.). The Islamic law stipulates that there are seven categories of mahram muabbad based on blood relations, as outlined in verse 23 of Surah al-Nisa'.

According to al-Dusuqi (2011), mahram muabbad refers to those who are permanently forbidden from marrying a man due to a permanent reason. Among them are all descendants of a mother or father, whether from similar both parents, similar father, or similar mother. These individuals are known as siblings, which include siblings who are i) similar both parents, ii) similar father, and iii) similar mother (al-Mawardi, 1999). As for the mother's uncle mentioned in item two, he is not considered a mahram muabbad for a woman. In fact, their relationship is that of a mahram muaqqat, which refers to individuals of different genders who are temporarily prohibited from marrying each other due to a specific reason or circumstance, until the reason for the prohibition ceases (Jamalluddin et al., 2000). In terms of shaking hands among mahram muaqqat, it is not permissible because only mahram muabbad are allowed to shake hands, not those who have a prohibition that could potentially be lifted, such as mahram muaqqat (al-Bantani, 2012). Therefore, the respondents' knowledge about the prohibition for a woman to shake hands with her mother's uncle aligns perfectly with the requirements of Islam.

In the issue of knowledge regarding the ruling on shaking hands among family members with a marriage relationship, items three and four, which describe the ruling on shaking hands with a stepmother and a stepfather, show somewhat different findings. Marriage relationship refers to the existence of a marital connection to an individual or a family member's marriage (Zaidan, 2000). Overall, the knowledge about shaking hands with a stepfather is at a high knowledge level, whereas knowledge about shaking hands with a stepmother is at a low knowledge level. These two rulings are closely related to the conditions of sexual intercourse to validate the mahram status. The stepfather for a woman was well understood when respondents realized that shaking hands is only permissible after the mother has had sexual intercourse with her new husband. This knowledge aligns with the verse of Allah s.w.t. which means: 'Prohibited to you (for marriage) are your mothers, your daughters, your sisters, your paternal aunts, your maternal aunts, the daughters of your brothers, the daughters of your sisters, your mothers who gave you suck, your milk-sucking sisters, the mothers of your wives (mothers-in-law), the daughters of your wives in your care from those whom you have had intercourse with, but if you have not consummated the marriage with your wives (and they are divorced), then there is no sin upon you for marrying them...' (al-Nisa': 23).

At the end of the verse above, Allah s.w.t. sets the condition for establishing mahram status between a man and his wife's daughter (stepdaughter) through sexual intercourse. This means that after a man marries a widow who has a daughter, the daughter is not yet allowed to shake hands with her stepfather. This is because their relationship has not yet been established as mahram (al-Nawawi, n.d.). The scholars (fuqaha) are unanimous in stating that it is forbidden for a Muslim to have physical contact with individuals of the opposite gender who are not considered mahram, also known as ajnabi (Zaidan, 2000). In contrast to the condition required to establish mahram status for a stepfather, the relationship between a stepmother and a man does not require

such a condition. A man is permitted to shake hands with his stepmother immediately after the marriage contract is valid, as the establishment of mahram status in this case does not require the condition of sexual intercourse (al-Nawawi, n.d.). This is based on the verse of Allah s.w.t. which means: 'And do not marry women whom your fathers have married, except what has already passed' (al-Nisa': 22).

This verse explains that among the individuals who are prohibited from marriage is the wife of the father (stepmother), which includes both wives who have and have not been consummated. This is because the phrase "who have been married" in this context encompasses both those whose marriage contract has been completed and those who have been consummated. Therefore, a father's wife, whose marriage contract has been completed even though consummation has not occurred, is still considered a mahram muabbad (perpetual mahram) (Zaidan, 2000), and a man is permitted to shake hands with her. However, in the case of stepmothers, the respondents' knowledge was found to be at a low level due to a misunderstanding in applying the requirement of consummation to confirm a mahram relationship. As a result, they believe that a man is not allowed to shake hands with a stepmother who has just completed the marriage contract and has not yet consummated the marriage. This understanding contradicts the Islamic law, which permits this practice because the relationship is considered mahram muabbad (Wazarat al-Awqaf, 1983).

For items five and six, which discuss the issue of shaking hands with a step-grandmother and step-grandfather, the respondents' level of knowledge is still at a moderate level. This is because most of the respondents understand that the biological mother of the stepmother and the biological father of the stepmother are included among the mahram muabbad group, with whom shaking hands is allowed. In family jurisprudence, this group is not considered part of the mahram muabbad category; rather, they are classified as non-mahram or ajnabi. Although the legal discussion among scholars regarding the mahram status of the stepmother and stepfather includes their upward lineage (al-Nawawi, t.t.), the step-grandmother and step-grandfather, from the perspective of Islamic law, are not considered the biological mother of the stepmother or the biological father of the stepmother (al-Hisni, n.d.). The step-grandmother or step-grandfather meant as mahram muabbad refers to the wife of the paternal grandfather or the husband of the maternal grandmother (Syh Noorul, 2025). This misunderstanding of the facts can lead to legal implications regarding shaking hands, as understood by some of the respondents.

Next, the item related to the ruling on shaking hands with a breastfeeding father-in-law also recorded a moderate level of understanding. This finding indicates that some respondents still have the knowledge that a woman is not allowed to shake hands with her husband's breastfeeding father. However, according to Islamic law, breastfeeding, which is one of the causes that establishes the mahram relationship (al-Mawardi, 1999), includes all family members of the breastfeeding woman, both by lineage and through marriage. This is based on a hadith narrated in Sahih al-Bukhari, where the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stated that breastfeeding establishes a mahram relationship just like it is established by lineage (al-Bukhari, 2000). This hadith shows that the mahram muabbad resulting from breastfeeding is the same as the mahram muabbad for an individual who is not involved in breastfeeding but is related by lineage or marriage. One of the mahrams established by breastfeeding is the breastfeeding father-in-law, referring to the wife's breastfeeding father (Jamalluddin, 2024). According to al-Nawawi (n.d.), the breastfeeding father-in-law is considered a mahram muabbad by majazi (analogy), whether or not the married couple has had sexual relations. Therefore, when they are established as mahram muabbad due to breastfeeding, they are certainly permitted to shake hands (Wazarat al-Awqaf, 1983).

## CONCLUSION

The study findings show that the current society has not fully mastered the laws regarding handshaking among family members of different genders. The overall results, which indicate that the respondents' knowledge level is in the moderate group, suggest that the issue of handshake boundaries still needs to be highlighted by Islamic scholars to ensure the preservation of the Islamic legal limits that have been set. This knowledge level is indirectly closely related to their understanding of the status of relationships among family members of different genders, whether they fall into the category of permanent mahram, temporary mahram, or non-mahram. The status of these relationships will have different implications for the permissibility of



handshaking. These findings imply the need to highlight the legal rulings regarding mahram and non-mahram statuses within the family to the society.

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